DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 229 291 SO 014 570

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TITLE Strategies of Life Course Analysis.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. on Aging (DHHS/PHS), Bethesda, MD.
PUB DATE Dec 82
GRANT AG00097
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association (81st, Washington, DC, December, 1982).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavioral Science Research; Cultural Context; Developmental Stages; Holistic Approach; *Measurement Techniques; *Research Methodology; *Research Needs; *Research Problems; Social Influences; Social Science Research
IDENTIFIERS *Life Cycles; *Life Events

ABSTRACT

Methodologies for life course analyses must explain complex biological, psychosocial, and social factors which result in various patterns of life trajectories. Four problems are characteristic of current research: a seemingly endless list of potentially significant variables; a dearth of life course theory beyond childhood to assist in targeting variables; the complex interweaving of factors (e.g., age, career stage, family stage); and the use of atemporal variables which are examined across time (Does an instrument measure the same construct in adolescence as in old age, or in differing historical periods?). Similarly, the polarization of current methodologies creates problems. For example, nomothetic strategies, concerned with developmental stages and universal processes, consider any contextual variation as an extraneous source of error and confusion. The opposite pole, contextual strategies, targets the social context to ascertain the way it shapes life. Also, unidimensional variables form one pole of which holism is the other extreme. The "scientific" psychologist or sociologist is pitted against the "humanist" biographer, often creating misunderstanding and unproductive argument. Neither extreme of these polarities works well; the most useful tools will capture interactions through time, among dimensions of lives, and between lives and their contents. (KC)

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# STRATEGIES OF LIFE COURSE ANALYSIS

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Paper presented in Symposium: The Art of Research at the 81st Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Assocation, Washington, D.C. December, 1982

Portions of this work were supported by NIA award #AG00097

SP 014 520

The value of well operationalized life course constructs lies in the degree to which they can further our attempts to describe and explain those complex linkages over time among biological, psychological, and social factors which result in various patterns of life trajectories. The culturally normative Life Course, provided by traditional social sciences, is totally inadequate for this task. It is a constructed, modal life, made up of only the most common interactions, and thus banishes the very diversity which could provide analytic purchase. For contrasting modal life courses merely describes differences among the sets of confounded factors which make up the socio-cultural wholes. In order to explain their impact on the life course, we must be able to disentangle the factors. Generally this requires intra-cultural, in addition to, inter-cultural analysis.

Thus it has been evident for some years that we need to move beyond modal description, to clarify and develop concepts that tap critical dimensions of life courses and differentiate among them. The lack of adequate methodologies has retarded the growth of both substantive knowledge and theory of life trajectories. This problem is acute for anthropologists, who typically collect rich life history materials which they cannot fully utilize.

These issues are now receiving unprecedented attention from scholars representing a range of disciplines: psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, etc. (Nydegger, 1983). Nevertheless, it is probably still fair to say that operationalizing strategies to deal systematically with life course materials -- that is, measurement -- is the least well developed aspect of the behavioral and social sciences, regardless of discipline. It is problematic for all.

Life Course Analysis Problems

The reasons are not hard to find. Let me briefly mention only four. First, the list of potentially significant variables involved in an entire life, or even a segment of a life, is seemingly endless. This imposes the necessary, but agonizing, a priori task of winnowing and selecting out those particular ones we predict will prove to be critical -- in other words, picking the winners.

Second, unfortunately, there is a dearth of theory of the life course beyond childhood to assist us in targeting these promising variables (Clausen, 1972). The life course researcher faces the same problem as a five-year old in a candy shop -- limited means confronting unlimited choice. The result is often the same also: paralysis of decision, finally resolved by a wild grab for the nearest, or the prettiest, candies. You may have noticed, for example, that stress has terrific consumer appeal under these conditions -- it is a gilt-wrapped construct. However, consumer appeal and sales records are seldom the soundest bases of choice.

Third, lives are complex interweavings of factors, which are all too faithfully mirrored in the multiple confounding of the variables in our analyses. Take age, for example, which is notoriously problematic: it is normatively confounded with career stage, family stage -- all life stages. Age is further confounded with time and place, the "sociohistoric situation" (Gergen, 1980) of lives, to which attention has been drawn largely in terms of the cohort (Ryder, 1965) which is a kind of age-grouping produced by ongoing social change. Through these linkages, age is then secondarily confounded with any variables linked to life stages or cohort; and so on and so on. Disentangling even a few key variables requires considerable ingenuity and is likely to demand unique, and difficult to obtain, samples (Nydegger, 1981).

Fourth, life course research has primarily used variables which are intrinsically a-temporal, and examined them across time. This poses awkward questions of validity, of the comparability of the meaning of measures from one age to another, or one time to another. Does an instrument measure the same construct in adolescence that it does in old age? Does it measure the same construct in historic periods of affluence and growth that it did during the Depression? If not, it must be translated into age-appropriate or historically appropriate terms for valid comparisons. But not only is this difficult, it has its own hazard: for some of these age changes are the very stuff of maturing, of aging -- in short, the essence of the life course, just as changes in meaning may be the distillation of history. Over-zealous elimination of differences in meaning in the search for age-free and history-free measures can blot out the life from the life course, and yield rather sterile variables of limited value.

None of these problems, and the others you may add, can be resolved by any one analytic strategy. The important questions will have to be examined from a number of directions, and with a variety of tools. I can discuss only a few general approaches here, but I hope that by pointing out their advantages and shortcomings, I can stimulate some of you to turn your attention to building better life course mousetraps.

## Strategic Polarities

Currently there is a strong thrust to develop life course measures in many disciplines, but all are in the formative stages. Therefore, rather than listing measures which will be out-of-date tomorrow, it seems to me more useful to organize this topic in terms of two fundamental strategic polarities which are implicit in the various approaches. In this way, I hope to highlight the unique contribution anthropologists can make to this effort.

Nomothetic/Contextualist Strategies

First, we can distinguish between nomothetic and contextualist strategies, which necessarily influence measurement techniques. The search for nomothetic ontogeny (an elegant mouthful meaning lawful regularities in development) is usually associated with developmental psychology, but anthropologists will recognize it in their own evolutionist tradition. This approach has been pronounced in child development from Freud to Piaget and has been extended into adult development by Erikson and others. For such researchers, intent on uncovering universal processes, any local perturbation (that is, contextually determined variation) is an extraneous source of error and confusion, which must be eliminated or controlled.

In gerontology, social change (or history) has been the most widely discussed contextual source of error. Hence the extensive literature on cohort-control by Schaie (1965), Baltes (1968) and others. However, class, ethnicity, sex, etc. are all, from this point of view, contextual sources of error -- a perspective unlikely to appeal to anthropologists. Nevertheless, this strategy does have the merit of keeping attention fixed on life course change , clearly defined, as in the many studies arising from the longitudinal database at Berkeley's Institute of Human Development (e.g. Block, 1971; Jones, et al, 1971; Maas & Kuypers, 1974; Eichorn, et al,1981).

The opposite pole reverses the focus by targeting the social context, or histo-niche, itself and attempts to ascertain the way in which it patterns lives. Historians such as Hareven (1978) and sociologists such as Elder (1974, 1979) have spearheaded the study of lives in relation to history, largely through studies of whole birth cohorts or cohort subgroups. To date, most of these studies have been essentially descriptive; however, they give promise of a solid database for future comparative research. Indeed, comparative demography is flourishing now in the field of family and history (e.g. Hareven, 1978).

Parenthetically, intra-cohort variation is marked, since demographic and other factors cause differential exposure to cohort-defining experiences. Aside from Elder's (1974) work, this critical issue has received too little attention conceptually or methodologically; nor are the principles of establishing cohort boundaries at all clear (Rosow, 1978). These problems will have to be addressed if we are to progress in the study of lives in historic time.

The relativism implied by attending to, rather than getting rid of, embedding social contexts has caused a great deal of controversy among psychologists in particular (Gergen, 1980). Nevertheless, stirring calls to integrate contextualism with developmental paradigms are being made, under the rubrics of dialectical psychology (Riegel, 1979), ecology of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), and environmental psychology (Proshansky, 1976). But no one knows how to go about establishing life-span developmental regularities in a cross-historical framework, or how to obtain what Thomae (1979) has called "change profiles," or how to solve the tricky question of external validity (Hultsch & Hickey, 1978). Needless to say, this is also true for a cross-cultural framework. Surely anthropology, as the relativistic and context-sensitive social science, could contribute to this integrative process.

## Unidimensional/Holistic Strategies

Second, an emphasis on discrete, unidimensional variables forms one pole of a continuum, of which holism is the other extreme. This is an age-old tension between fields such as experimental psychology and anthropology, between sociology and history. In life course terms, it pits the "scientific" psychologist or sociologist against the "humanist" biographer, and is often the basis for misunderstanding and unproductive argument

about the relative merits of research that is quantitative versus "qualitative" -- an ambiguous term at best.

Presently,here too there is a slight, but very welcome, trend toward a mid-ground accomodation: on one hand, sophisticated analytic techniques now allow simultaneous examination of a large number of variables, as well as their interactions, On the other hand, anthropologists are devoting attention to the problems of life-history methods (Langness & Frank, 1981) and the multi-mini-biography strategy recently employed by others (e.g. Myerhoff & Simić, 1978) points up commonality among lives as well as uniqueness.

Perhaps the best known strategies aiming for this mid-ground are the life event techniques. A graphic, respondent-determined version is known as the Life Graph. This is simply a two-dimensional grid, upon which the respondent plots the events of his life (Back & Morris, 1974). Customarily, one dimension is age, the other a general notion of good/bad; but there is no inherent restriction on either dimension. However, note that in analysis, the events may be multivariate, but the other dimension is a single variable.

I have found this technique to be particularly useful in profiling limited aspects of the life course: goals over time, the life course of roles, and so forth. But I have had to go beyond the simple graph itself, usually by adding more "dependent" variables. Such data can be obtained longitudinally, but most commonly are retrospective. Therefore a caveat: Life Graphs or Profiles are re-constructions of the past, as Myerhoff (1980) has emphasized; we must be wary of retrospective bias, especially in accounts of emotional states, which are most subject to unreliability.

When life graphs are used as middle level measures, as profiles of limited multivariate aspects of the life course, they can be readily analyzed. For example, it is simple to compare points in time, or certain events, across individuals; and profiles of single outcome variables can be scored for range, for amplitude in relation to significant events, for direction of change, for overall trend, and so forth. However, techniques to analyze these materials as whole lives are still primitive -- little more than visual inspection and idiosyncratic categorization by pattern. Geometries of the life course have been recommended (Back, 1980) but, to my knowledge, none have been developed yet.

A similar technique, but more researcher-determined, is the Life Event inventory. Best known through the work of Holmes and Rahe (1967; Gunderson & Rahe, 1974) and the Dohrenwends (1974, 1978), life events have been examined in terms of their impact on specific outcomes, notably stress, health, psychological symptoms, etc. However, as Hultsch and Plemons (1979) point out, the lists of events included vary widely, often combining "events which may be characterized as subjective and objective, voluntary and involuntary, positive and negative, and so forth" (18). Reese and Smyer (1983) further stress that the distinction between event as static product and event as process is blurred and confused. It is abundantly clear that the construct itself needs clarification rather than premature measurement refinement.

Recentiy two major attempts have been made in this direction of dimensionalizing life events so as to be more theoretically relevant. Brim and Ryff (1980) derived eight types of events from the following three dimensions: 1) age-relatedness, 2) likelihood of occurrence for an individual, and 3) prevalence in a given population. Reese and Smyer (1983)

have expanded this taxonomy by intersecting the dimensions, yielding over thirty categories. Presumably still more could be identified: as Bandura (1982) has pointed out, even an adventitious, chance encounter can play a prominent role in shaping a life. A great deal more controversy will arise over methods of life event analysis, but all this concern is clearly rooted in the desire to capture at least some of the complexity of lives, and to move toward a welcome multivariate mid-ground between unidimensional and hoslistic strategies.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be obvious by now that I strongly recommend the development of strategies which avoid either extreme of these polarities. They have simply not worked well enough. What is needed most at this point are methods of operationalizing the major, distinctive patterns of lives. To me, it seems likely that the most useful tools will prove to be those which best capture interactions through time -- among dimensions of lives and between lives and their contexts.

Anthropologists are eclectic, relativistic, and multidimensional. I can think of no better qualifications to fashion the tools needed for life course analysis of real lives.

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